

DIASPORA AND SITES OF MEMORY: AN APPROACH TO LITERATURE BY IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT: Today's world is characterized by transnationalism, an intense flow of people across geographical and cultural boundaries. The transit of subjects is of particular interest to diaspora writers, whose works often portray intercultural relations and explore issues such as dislocation, belonging, and displacement. Such is the context for this article's contention: that spaces and objects become crucial *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, in Pierre Nora's terms, for diaspora writers. Of many possible sites of memory, food is the one that seems more recurrent than others in literary works by diaspora writers. The present article also argues that not only food or dishes, but also the act of cooking itself, as a sort of voluntary mnemonic performance, may constitute a site of memory. As represented through fiction, food and culinary exchange illustrate well what Avtar Brah describes as "diaspora space", that is, a space that is inhabited both by the immigrant and the native, and where interethnic and intercultural exchanges occur, where the local meets the global. The claims discussed in the article are illustrated with a discussion of the novel *Crescent*, by Diana Abu-Jaber.

Keywords: Diaspora; memory; food.

DIÁSPORA E *LIEUX DE MÉMOIRE*: A LITERATURA DE IMIGRANTES NOS ESTADOS UNIDOS

RESUMO: O mundo contemporâneo é caracterizado pelo transnacionalismo, um fluxo intenso de pessoas através de fronteiras geográficas e culturais. O trânsito de sujeitos é foco de interesse por parte de escritores diaspóricos, cujas obras frequentemente retratam relações interculturais e abordam aspectos como deslocamento, pertencimento e deslocamento. Tal é o contexto para a proposta desenvolvida no presente artigo; a hipótese em tela é que esses espaços e objetos se tornam *lieux de mémoire* cruciais, segundo a definição apresentada por Pierre Nora, para membros da grupos diaspóricos. Dentre os diversos lugares de memória possíveis, a comida surge como um dos mais recorrentes em obras de escritores diaspóricos. O presente artigo argumenta, ainda, que não apenas a comida e os pratos com ela preparados constituem lugares de memória, mas também o próprio ato de cozinhar, espécie de performance mnemônica voluntária. A comida e as trocas culinárias, representadas através da ficção, ilustram o que Avtar Brah chama de "espaço diaspórico": um espaço habitado tanto pelo imigrante quanto pelo nativo, em que ocorrem trocas interétnicas e interculturais, em que o local encontra o global. A hipótese desenvolvida no artigo serve de base para a discussão do romance *Crescent*, da escritora Diana Abu-Jaber.

Palavras-chave: Diáspora; memória; comida.

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“Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places, not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right
about just sitting quietly in one’s room?”

Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there... No. Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?”

“Questions of Travel”, Elizabeth Bishop

With the advent of multiculturalism and the various movements for civil rights that took place in the 1960s, the belief in the idea of a homogeneous national ethos in the United States came apart, but the recent election of Republican Donald Trump seems to be an attempt to revive it. Transnationalism, a social movement spurred by globalization, is under serious threat especially in the Trump administration, who appallingly fails to understand the negotiation between the local and the global.

Movement and human flows characterize our times; one needs only to notice the abundance of terms related to it: exile, diaspora, expatriation, dislocation, immigration and emigration, pilgrimage, travel, etc. In fact, migration, travel and movement are among the oldest human activities, and as such it has appeared in literature since its earliest manifestations. Specifically in the case of literatures in English, the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* and *Robinson Crusoe* come to mind, among several other seminal works. Literary production by immigrants and their descendants, begun with the arrival of the first generation and systematically organized in the past decades, also fits under the category of works spurred by movement and shows that it is an enduring trend. The existence of diaspora groups within the boundaries of the United States is undeniable and, strategically speaking, it would be a mistake to simply overlook this fact. The transnational subjects that make up diaspora communities are powerful political agents who may effect if not immediate changes, certainly some degree of resistance through an act of visibility.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, in “The Multiculturalist Misunderstanding”, affirms that “the trouble with appeal to cultural difference is that it obscures rather than illuminates” the edginess in society caused by ethnic tension. “Culture”, says the cultural theorist, “is not the problem, and it is not the solution” (APPIAH, 1997, p. 36). While one must agree with Appiah that cultural artifacts of any particular ethnic group is more widely accepted than the members of the group themselves, it is also true that literary works that enact an

interconnectivity that foregrounds the cultural boundaries end up consequently staging fictional counterparts of the cultural actors that Appiah points out as the source of social discord, thus making their presence more conspicuous. To that effect, literary works by diaspora subjects can offer great contribution.

Specifically writing about exile, Eva Hoffman's discussion on the psychic positioning of "new nomads", as she calls contemporary migrants, points out both negative and positive sides of the coin: despite the human cost involved in one's uprooting, the condition of new nomadism may be a stimulus to creativity and writing: "Being deframed, so to speak, from everything familiar, makes for a certain fertile detachment and gives one new ways of observing and seeing" (HOFFMAN, 1999, p. 50). Hoffman does make a clear distinction between new nomadism and traditional diasporas, insofar as new nomads exist now in a decentered world (HOFFMAN, 1999, p. 57). Nevertheless, theoretical rigor apart, the fact is that writers who have immigrated and descendants of immigrants, or diaspora writers, for the sake of the focus proposed in the present essay – who have turned to writing have invariably memorialized the feeling of loss that Hoffman points out in regard to exiles:

In exile, the impulse to memorialize is magnified, and much glorious literature has emerged from it. *Native Realm*, by Milosz or Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, some of Brodsky's essays in *Less Than One*, or even Kundera's much cooler take on transplantation in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* – these are works of lyrical commemoration informed by a tenderness of what is lost and the need, even the obligation, to remember (HOFFMAN, 1999, p. 51).

The English language used by these writers is resignified to encompass the experience of diaspora subjects. Rather than a foreign language, it becomes an insider's literary medium through which other aspects are likewise resignified. Spaces and objects take on new symbolic meanings in the negotiation between the place of origin and the current cultural setting. It is my contention that spaces and objects metaphorically mean what they mean, but also mean something else, something more, and thus become crucial *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, in Pierre Nora's terms, for diaspora writers.

According to Nora, memory is not static, and, differently from history, it is subjected to the acts of remembering and forgetting (NORA, 1989, p. 8). Multiple insofar as it constitutes group representation, memory ties us to the present, rather than the past, as it is grounded in everyday elements and practices that, invested with deliberate memorial significance, become sites of collective consciousness – though oftentimes this responsibility

may rest upon the individual. Nora's sites of memory, thus, end up being a site of agency as well for the agents that Appiah pointed out as the cause of social tension, discussed above.

My claim in this essay is that spaces and objects take on an exponential role as sites of memory for members of a diaspora, as they redefine boundaries. But my claim is yet twofold: of the myriad possible sites of memory, food is the one that seems more conspicuous than others in literary works by immigrant writers and their descendants. Food, a sign of diasporic resilience, has been the focus of anthropological more than literary research, though the past few decades have begun to witness a change in this scenario. Among other publications, one can mention, for instance, *Alimentum: The Literature of Food*, a periodical launched in 2005 that features sections on poetry and fiction. Also worthy of note are Joana Kadi's *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (1994), Wenying Xu's *Reading Food in Asian American Literature* (2008), and the 2007 special issue of *MELUS – Multiethnic Literature of the United States* on food.

Although literary works may at times include recipes, as does Joana Kadi's collection, they are far different from recipe books, inasmuch as they go beyond a list of ingredients and instructions so as to convey a deeper, aura-like, significance of the act of cooking. In these works, didacticism is replaced with the fictional desire to feed one's soul as well as the souls of others. Culinary creativity flourishes in a disorderly kitchen, while the bond between individuals undergoes kneading, grinding, seasoning, simmering. Food, ultimately, to an extent regulates the approximation and the distancing between individuals and between the individual and the environment.

What is often referred to as ethnic food, whether taken as a sign of power or disempowerment, is in either case a bonding element for members of a community. For instance, Italian food is widely appreciated in the United States today, but in the nineteenth century mainstream Americans considered Italian cuisine rather rudimentary and socially inferior. In fact, eating habits can reveal the degree of cultural assimilation of an immigrant. Except for rare situations when there are no ethnic markets that sell typical ingredients, the individual's choice of food is more revealing of cultural belonging than the way he or she dresses, or perhaps even the language one speaks.

Fred L. Gardaphé and Wenying Xu, who edited the aforementioned special issue of *MELUS – Multi-Ethnic Literatures in the United States* dedicated to the theme of food, point out the pressure to homogenize and reform the immigrants' eating habits in order to transform them into potential consumers:

Immigrant foodways have been traditionally perceived by mainstream culture as markers of ethnic inferiority... to reform the immigrant's foodways was not simply an effort to assimilate him or her into mainstream American culture; it was also an effort to turn him or her into a capitalist consumer, because culinary diversities in the 1940s resisted homogenizing, industrial food production (GARDAPHÉ, 2007, p. 9).

If culinary traditions have bravely resisted geographical dislocation and the pressure of assimilation, this does not mean that they do not undergo any change at all. For instance, while mainstream Americans gradually changed their diet to incorporate pasta and pizza, Arab Americans also learned to enjoy hot dogs and hamburgers, which appear side by side with *kibbeh*, *homos bi tahini* and *baklava* in the menus of some Arab eateries. Another example is the case of Japanese *sushi*, that in Brazil can be made with mango, a tropical fruit – that is quite popular here, though not really native to Brazil. This type of culinary exchange illustrates appropriately what Avtar Brah has described as “diaspora space”, a space that is inhabited both by the immigrant and the native:

Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes. It addresses the global condition of culture, economics and politics as a site of ‘migrancy’ and ‘travel’ which seriously problematizes subject position of the ‘native’. My central argument is that diaspora space as a conceptual category is ‘inhabited’ not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous (BRAH, 1996, p. 181).

The study of traditional foods is, thus, of particular interest to the field of diaspora, and, by extension, diaspora literature, as it foregrounds both hybridity and group membership. While food can be a site of memory, it does not entail a nostalgic desire to return, but rather it encompasses a form of “culinary citizenship”, as Anita Mannur has put it, a “form of affective citizenship which grants subjects the ability to claim and inhabit certain subject positions via their relationship to food” (MANNUR, 2007, p. 13).

Among the various diaspora groups for which food is emblematic of belonging and cultural negotiation, Arab Americans have excelled in the literary portrayal of such aspect. A recent manifestation of the importance of food for this group of hyphenated Americans was the event called “Food and Humanity”, organized by the Middle East Institute in Washington,

D.C. Writing about the gathering, Raneem Alkhatib calls attention to the power of food to build communities and bring people together:

Food in the Arab world goes beyond just sustenance. It's a vital characteristic of Arab culture and is heavily incorporated in traditional and even religious ceremonies and events. Preserving culinary traditions can be a form of resistance in times of loss and war. Arabs living abroad, especially, look to food as a way to get a taste of home. In many ways, food represents home to Arabs who have been displaced (ALKHATIB, 2017).

According to the Arab American Institute, also located in Washington D.C, it is estimated that nearly 3,6 million people of Arab ancestry live in the US today. The first wave of immigrants faced a heavily assimilationist context, but thanks to a strong desire to maintain cultural ties, as well as to publications, at times bilingual, that helped disseminate news and traditions, they managed to pass on group values and practices to younger generations. Still, the need to balance out their cultural legacy and their insertion into American society continues. In an essay entitled “Arab American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions and Cultural Negotiations”, the Palestinian-American critic Lisa Majaj puts forth a call to elicit public affirmation of Arabs in the United States. According to her, group affirmation would be of crucial importance for Arab Americans,

[...] who have been historically rendered invisible in the context by their relatively small numbers, by their ambiguous location within American racial and ethnic categories, and by their tenuous status within American political and cultural contexts. Excluded from American citizenship at various times on the basis of being “Asian” or “nonwhite”, Arab Americans currently are officially classified as white. This classification, although seeming to grant inclusion in mainstream American society, is ambiguous (MAJAJ, 1999, p. 320-21).

Being classified as whites by government agencies does not grant Arab Americans inclusion in American society. Being “honorary” whites, as Majaj puts it, does not save them from situations of racism and discrimination. In effect, Arab Americans writers have been engaging in a form of literary diplomacy as they sometimes tackle the racial issue and also try to efface the idea of homogeneity and ‘sameness’ found in the way many Americans perceive Arabs. The challenge, though, in my viewpoint, is for them to do so without merely explaining or translating Arab American subjectivity and practices to non-Arab Americans.

Jordanian-American Diana-Abu Jaber, a representative of the contemporary Arab diaspora writers, uses her bicultural background as a sort of well from which she draws the

plots of her novels, which include *Arabian Jazz* (1993), *Crescent* (2003), *Origin* (2007), *Birds of Paradise* (2011), and of the memoirs *The Language of Baklava* (2001) and *Life without a Recipe* (2016). *Crescent's* plot, particularly, depends so heavily on the motif of food and cooking that even the most inexperienced reader would notice its relevance. *Crescent* is a novel about thirty-nine-year-old Sirine, a chef at Lebanese eatery called Nadia's Café. Although she has not learned to speak Arabic, the language of her father, Sirine is a talented chef who prepares the Arab dishes she learned at an early age from her American mother.

At the café, Sirine cooks “the favorite – but almost forgotten – dishes of her childhood. She felt as if she were returning to her parent's tiny kitchen and her earliest memories” (ABU-JABER, 2003, p. 19), memories of a time before her parents were killed. Sirine's story is interwoven with the narrative of Hanif, an exiled literature professor, the flashbacks of his life back in Iraq, and his escape from Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. Besides the conflictive love story between Sirine and Hanif, the plot is made further elaborate by her uncle's fragmented embedded ancient narrative of the slave Abdelrahman Salahadin, who surprisingly jumps into the present time of the novel and contributes to the convergence of the plotlines.

Not only the dishes she prepares but also the very space of the café works as a powerful agent that brings characters of different ethnicities together. It is while enjoying Sirine's food, but more significantly while in the space of the café, that immigrants question their condition and make revelations regarding their intimate feelings and their experience in the United States. The café, thus, triggers an awareness of the issue of direction and orientation, in literal as well as in figurative ways. The café is described as filled with people at mealtime and with “currents of Arabic that ebb around Sirine [and] fill her head with mellifluous voices” (ABU-JABER, 2003, p. 17). It is in Nadia's Café that a collective though heterogeneous community forms and the past is somehow reenacted to mitigate the feeling of loss that its regular customers experience.

While the café works as a site of memory for the university students that regularly eat there, it is also a site of personal memory for Sirine herself, since the preparation of the food to be served in the café takes her back in time to her mother's kitchen. Her parents, working for the American Red Cross, were killed in Africa, and “on the day she learned of their deaths, Sirine went into the kitchen and made an entire tray of stuffed grape leaves all by herself” (ABU-JABER, 2003, p. 50). The *baklava* she prepares for the café customers takes on deep personal significance insofar as it brings to her memory the image of her own parents preparing the same traditional dessert, as they “swam together through the round arcs of her

mother's arm and her father's tender strokes" (ABU-JABER, 2003, p. 58-59). Not surprisingly, she and Hanif end up preparing their first *baklava* together later in the novel.

As Pierre Nora also pointed out in his essay discussed above, sites of memory

[...] originate with this sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally. The defense, by certain minorities, of a privileged memory that has retreated to jealously protected enclaves in this sense intensely illuminates the truth of *lieux de mémoire* – that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away (NORA, 1989, p. 12).

Nora summarizes then the essence of sites of memory: first, there is the danger of erasure of memories, which then triggers a voluntary effort to maintain them. As fictionally represented in *Crescent*, a café that serves Arab food may be more than a spontaneous place of gathering; it is the spatial concretization of a rather carefully thought out intention to bring together a certain type of customer willing to engage politically and culturally, where memory is enacted each day. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that this site of memory makes itself conspicuous to non-descendants of Arabs as well, as does the fictional neighborhood where it is located: Irangeles. "Even though Nadia's Café is in the middle of an Iranian neighborhood, there are few Iranian customers. After the long, bitter war between Iraq and Iran, some of Um-nadia's Iranian neighbors refused to enter the café because of Sirine, the Iraqi-American chef" (ABU-JABER, 2003, p. 20).

The café is portrayed in the novel as a sort of Arab mosaic:

At Nadia's Café, there is a TV tilted in the corner above the cash register, permanently tuned to the all-Arabic station, with news from Qatar, variety shows and a shopping channel from Kuwait, endless Egyptian movies, Bedouin soup operas in Arabic, and American soap operas with Arabic subtitles. There is a group of regulars who each have their favorite shows and dishes and who sit at the same tables as consistently as if they were assigned (ABU-JABER, 2003, p. 20).

Although the mosaic may seem a bit caricatured, it is so constructed to illustrate the heterogeneous nature of the Arab diaspora. As pointed out by critic Carol Fadda-Conrey, the names of some of the Arab students in Arabic mean North, South, East, and West, and they "signify distinct geographical entities that can be interpreted as individualized characteristics challenging the reductive attributes the term Arab often generates" (FADDA-CONREY, 2006,

p. 195). One cannot help but notice, too, the American soap operas side by side with Arab TV shows, which suggests these immigrants are consumers of American cultural artifacts as well.

Besides the Arab immigrants that attend the café regularly, other minor characters are Victor Hernandez, the Mexican busboy, and the Italian Eustavio, a waiter at La Dolce Vita, another café. It is at Nadia's Café that these immigrants put their homesickness to mnemonic practice as a means to deal with their present. Places are, in Pierre Nora's words, "*lieux de memoire* only if the imagination invests it with a symbolic aura... inasmuch as it is also the object of a ritual" (p.19), which is precisely the café's significance for Sirine and for the customers. Drawing together a heterogenous crowd confers on the café and especially on Sirine's food the aura of a bonding agent. The cultural and political bridge that is being memorialized there and then, through the ritual of gathering and eating, informs the characters' displacement.

Abu-Jaber's novel supports also the claim that it is not only the food or the dishes, but also the act of cooking that may constitute *lieux de memoire*. Sites of memory are not only the result of actions, but may be the very act of making itself, an intentional mnemonic performance. Sirine's dishes feed the customers, and they feed back recollections of the past. At the same time, the preparation of a typical dish is a chef's reenactment of the past invested with ritualistic significance, as is the case with *Abu-Jaber's* protagonist.

As *Crescent's* plot develops, it gradually mixes, or juxtaposes, western and non-western cultural emblems in a clear reference to diversity: Richard Burton and Omar Sharif, Hollywood and tales of mermaids, among others. The inevitability of hybridity is thus underscored, as is the approximation of past and present: after all, the premise of sites of memory is to tie one intricately to the present as emblems of the past are foregrounded, as in a momentary suspension of chronology. This is precisely what the reader finds is the embedded story of the fugitive slave Abdelrahman Salahadin. Food is the fuel Sirine's uncle uses to propel his narrative about the slave Abdel. In the beginning of each chapter of *Crescent*, the reader is presented with chapters of the mythical story of the fugitive slave alongside references to Arab food. As her uncle himself informs, "I would just like to point out at this moment, for the record, that accomplished uncles and storytellers are usually rewarded with plates of knaffea pastry. For the record. Then we can get on with our story" (ABU-JABER, 2003, p. 34). Like a male Scheherazade, the uncle manages to move on – that is, to be fed and nurtured – day after day as his embedded tale is told in installments.

Storytelling and cooking/eating are so intricately intertwined that the two diegetic levels end up converging: Sirine and her uncle, teller and listener, naturally, are familiar with the character of Abdel, but the fugitive slave gains another dimension as other characters, café customers, seem to be well aware of the slave's existence. While embedded stories usually have an actional function, as is the case of Scheherazade's *One Thousand and One Nights*, or a reflexive function, which we find, for instance, in works that use *mise en abyme*, in *Crescent* the tale within the tale is a catalyst for the juxtaposition between past and present, as the fugitive slave from the Arab past leaves the hypodiegetic level, appears in Hollywood, California, and jumps into Sirine's and Hanif's story in the diegetic level.

In the final analysis, the café constitutes a diaspora space, in the terms proposed by Avtar Brah and discussed above, where not only rivalries take place, as the dispute between Iraqis and Iranian, but also Arab immigrants of various backgrounds meet and is attended by natives as well. Ultimately, the café becomes a stage for interethnic and intercultural exchanges, a place where the local meets the global. Despite the intensification of the global flow of people in recent times, there seems to be arising a strong right wing opposition to immigration, which in turn contributes to the increase in prejudice against members of diaspora groups. However, the contemporary post-national scenario promotes an anti-essentialist setting that favors cultural diversity, oftentimes fictionally represented in works such as Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, discussed here, as well in other works by diaspora writers. These works, however, do not provide an answer to today's predicament. They tell a story, but, as Sirine's uncle says in the end of the novel when she demands to know what happened next, "Habeebti, you must never tell everything" (ABU-JABER, 2003, p. 340).

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